RUSSIAN DANCE

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Overview   Like other nations the Russians see dance, an art form that uses the body as its instrument, as a reflection of their lives, culture and history. Ancient Russian dance was religious in nature, a part of organized pagan rituals where dances were performed in honor of the gods. Although dance later lost its religious character, it remained a part of social events such as births, marriages, religious and national holidays, festivals, etc. As one of the Western European art forms being introduced into Russia in the late 17th – early 18th centuries the new dance form, ballet, carved a niche for itself among the existing forms of dance practiced and performed in the country. Russian folk dances vary from region to region, each displaying its own unique characteristics.

ANCIENT PERIOD

Khorovod (Karagod, tanok, krug, ulitsa): This ancient folk dance originated as part of pagan rituals performed both to honor the sun god, Yaril, and to show repentance. The songs and the dances were slow with participants holding hands, generally in the middle of a circle created by three women.

Plyaska: Performed by one dancer, pairs, or numerous dancers, this folk dance is characterized by passionate movements, emphasizing the dancer's individuality. The music for this dance is a traditional instrumental form of music whose origins pre-date Kievan Rus.

Pereplyas: Performed in pairs, this dance takes the form of a competition with each dancer attempting to outdo the other through a display of skill, power and talent.

POSTCLASSICAL PERIOD

Prisyadka (Cossack Dance): Danced by men, this folk dance is characterized by kicks performed from deep squats.

Barynya: A fast, spirited folk dance characterized by squats and stomping, the barynya is accompanied by *chastushka* (folk song) and is improvised, rather than following a set pattern.

Kamarinskaya: This traditional folk dance is characterized by losing oneself in the dance, improvisation, and strong emotion.

Chechotka: Performed by a *bayan* (accordion) player wearing *lapti* (shoes made of birch bark fiber), the chechotka is a tradition Russian form of tap dance.

Mazurka: Of Polish origin, the mazurka was popular at balls in the time of the Russian Empire. It was danced by couples, often four or eight, and involved heel clicks and stamps together with improvised moves.

Pletionka (the Braid): Although similar to a Greek chain dance, in the pletionka while the dancers in the chain perform the same basic steps, the lead will often break free of the other dancers and perform an improvisation.

Troika: Named after the traditional Russian sled pulled by three horses, this dance is performed by one man and two women.

Trepak: Characterized by prisiadka (kicking from a deep squat), this lively Cossack dance is generally performed by men.

Yablochko: Generally considered a sailor's dance, it is performed to accompaniment of chastushka folk songs.

EARLY MODERN PERIOD

Kadril (Rigodon): Generally danced by four couples arranged in a square this folk dance of French origin was often danced competitively.

Lancier: Danced by four couples, this variant of the Quadrille is a form of square dance of French origin.

Ballet: Ballet came to Russia with Peter the Great who made assemblies and balls important social functions in his court. The introduction of classical ballet into Russia was simply one element of Peter's diverse methods to make Russia European. Ballet was prestigious because it was foreign, and Parisian in particular, and was regarded as a form of etiquette rather than an art form. The first imperial ballet school, directed by Jean-Baptiste Landé was established in 1738, and by the 1740s there were three ballet masters. Catherine II's establishment of an imperial theater system in 1756, a directorate of imperial theaters in 1766, the construction of the Bolshoi Theater in 1773, and the establishment of the imperial theater school in 1779 all secured a firm place for ballet in Russia. As the 18th century drew to a close, the ballet school was an element of the imperial theater bureaucracy, and some of the most important European ballet masters and choreographers of this period had worked to create the Russian imperial ballet.

NINETEENTH CENTURY

Polka: With its distinctive three quick steps followed by a hop this dance of Bohemian origin requires a spacious dancefloor for couples as they circle about.

Krakovyak: Directed by the lead male dancer as he sings, this dance of Polish origin is performed by several couples.

Padespan: This rapid ballroom dance for couples took its inspiration from the Spanish Pas d'Espagne.

Romantic Period: Ballet masters in Russia in the 19th century continued to come from abroad; among the most important were Pehr Christian Johansson, Jules Perrot, Charles-Louis Didelot, Marius Petipa, and Arthur Saint-Léon.

Russian School: The Russian school, which came to be regarded as possessing the most well-developed technique of any school, emerged as a synthesis of the French school and the Italian school whose techniques was introduced by Ceccheti. Some of the young Russian dancers trained by Ceccheti in the late 19th century became some of the most famous dancers of the early 20th century – Anna Pavlova, Vaslav Nijinsky and Michael Fokine. Other students of his such as Agrippina Vaganova in Russia and Ninette de Valois in England became founders of their own companies of developed their own teaching systems. These teachers and dancers took the techniques of the Russian school back to France, and from there they spread into other parts of Europe and the world.

Grand Ballet (Age of Petipa): Taken from the French term *ballet à grand spectacle*, Russian grand ballet was developed under Marius Petipa, a French dancer and choreographer who worked more than six decades at the Mariinsky Theater in St. Petersburg. Grand ballet, productions that matched contemporary operas in terms of length and storyline, became the favored form in the late 19th century when modern classical ballet reached its peak in Russia. Considered an "art of spectacle" *[zrelishchnoe iskusstvo],* the visual effects of grand ballet overshadowed the music, and even rivalled the dancing itself in importance.

Ballet-Féerie: Popular in the last two decades of the 19th century in private theaters in Russia, *ballet-féerie* was an Italian-based popular derivation of grand ballet which emphasized visual effects at the expense of choreography, flashy performances by the main dancers and set routines for the others. The plots were generally based on fairy tales; the most famous *ballet-féerie* was the 1881 St. Petersburg production of Luigi Manzotti's *Excelsior.*

Bolshoi Ballet: Taking it name from the Bolshoi Theater in 1825, some of the most important choreographers of the 19th century – Arthur Saint-Léon, Marius Petipa and Carlo Blasis – staged their works at this theater. Even during the Soviet period the Bolshoi Ballet was able keep its name.

Mariinsky Ballet (Kirov Ballet): Originally named for the Mariinsky Theater in St. Petersburg, the Mariinsky Ballet would be renamed twice in the 20th century. The first was in 1917 when it became the State Academy of Ballet and Opera, and the second in 1934 when it was renamed the Kirov Ballet following Sergei Kirov's assassination.

TWENTIETH CENTURY

The period in the early 20th century between the last works by Petipa and the ballets of Nijinsky, Gorsky and Fokine were a period stagnation and decline for Russian Ballet.

Acmeism: In the 1910s the esthetic elements of Acmeism – clarity of expression and compactness of form – could be seen Russian ballet productions staged in Paris. Mikhail Fokine's *Schéhérazade* and *Polovtsian Dances,* and the works of Vaslav Nijinsky's works all displayed a clarity of forms and a clear emphasis on the tangible world.

Modernist Period: The flight of numerous composers, dancers and choreographers from Russia after the revolution combined with lack of foreign artists entering the country left Russian ballet with no option other than develop it own talent. Russian ballet came to be known as Soviet ballet, and was isolated from outside influence. Although the Central Theatre Committee (*Tsentroteatr*) had assumed control over imperial theaters, including the Maryinsky (Kirov) and Bolshoi, in 1919, independent, experimental choreographers and dance troupes flourished in the 1920s. However, these independent groups and artists were all brought under state control in the early 1930s.

Neo-classical period:

Ballets Russes: Despite its name, Sergei Diaghilev's Ballets Russes (1911-1929), never performed in Russia, instead it used Russian artists to bring its vision of traditional Russian dance merged with new choreography, modern design, contemporary music, and folk art. Two of its dancers, Vaslav Nijinsky and Anna Pavlova, would become household names. Just before the outbreak of World War I, Diaghilev began to collaborate with artists such as Braque, Cocteau, Matisse, Derain, Satie, and Picasso, as well as with Russian modernists such as Goncharova, Naum Gabo, and Larinov to stage avant-garde works.

Balanchine: Originally a dancer in the Mariinsky Ballet, George Balanchine defected from the Soviet Union while on tour in Europe in 1925 and joined Diaghilev's Ballets Russes. In 1933 Balanchine emigrated to the US, later becoming a co-founder of the New York City Ballet.

Discussion/Questions

1. How did the period of Europeanization effect ballet?

2. How were the Russian Avant-Garde and Diaghilev's Ballet Russes linked?

3- During the 19th and 20th centuries what genre changes did Russian ballet pass through?

Reading

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